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AMERICA PREFIGURED

AN ADDRESS AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY
OCTOBER 21, 1892

BY
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ADDRESS DELIVERED IN APPLETON CHAPEL ON COLUMBUS DAY, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1892.

UNDER the spell of a great commemoration, a common devotion to a learned life has brought *us* here together. We may, therefore, well remember that the most successful seaman of our day, who has brought learning and practical tests into unison, is he who passed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and laid open the long-sought passage by the northeast; who received his incentive to such deeds in a professor's chair; and who has placed his name beside those of Magellan and Da Gama, the discoverers of the great passages by the south, four centuries ago. We may, then, pause to pay this tribute to Nordenskiöld, the scholar *and* the discoverer, before we enter upon the consideration of some of the relations of scholarship and seamanship in the world's greatest discovery.

It was but recently that a new phase of the wisdom of Aristotle was evoked from oblivion. It behooves us to-day to recall that another phase of that same wisdom, manifested in his successors, after eighteen centuries, summoned a new world from a similar oblivion. It was this peerless teacher of the ancient time who

"Bred

Great Alexander to subdue the world!"

and who was also of those who exhausted worlds and then imagined new, leaving it for others to summon these latent realms from the deep for men to occupy.

Down through the ages, with their darkness and light, this large circumspection passed from one to another, as men unrolled the papyrus and kept alive the vision upon which we dwell to-day. It was English blood, pulsating in the brain of an Oxford teacher in the thirteenth century, which gave to science the illustrious name of Roger Bacon. It was he who brought this wisdom, inherited from Aristotle, to the forefront in an ample philosophy, and transmitted it to those who were the immediate inspirers of Columbus.

The early years of the fifteenth century were a time when minds of adventurous speculation grew firmer in the belief that

there was more of the earth than what was known to be inhabited. In what direction should men turn to increase their knowledge of this part which was unknown? Opinions differed, of course. Some said to the north, others pointed to the south, but the ice of the one and the burning zone of the other daunted the boldest. It needed English blood once more, coursing down through John of Gaunt to his grandson, Prince Henry the Navigator, who organized those efforts, directed those energies, and inspired that confidence which carried his sailors unscathed through the burning belts of the African coast. Year after year these doughty Portuguese mariners pushed farther and farther, until they doubled the Cape of Good Hope under Vasco da Gama. The way to Calicut was now opened, and farther on they came to that Cathay which had grown attractive in the descriptions of Marco Polo.

Two results came with scientific precision from this hardy seaman-ship of the Portuguese, and from the inspiring trust of Prince Henry. One was that Da Gama's experience of the ocean winds and currents led him to instruct one of his successors on this African route to bear away towards the west in order to avoid their opposition. Thus it was that Cabral, under these warnings, first saw that Brazilian coast which the Bull of Demarcation had already confirmed to Portugal. The new world was thus found again by an obedience to meteorologic laws. A second result from the development of Prince Henry's aims led the Portuguese on from Cathay to the Moluccas, and thence across the Pacific till they struck the coast of California, there is some reason to suppose, before Balboa had crossed the isthmus at Darien. So the new world was again found from the east, as it had been already from the west, as a natural outcome of a scientific perception. This is what we owe to Prince Henry and to the Portuguese in the revelation of the new world. America was thus in a sense rediscovered from the side of Asia, and along the paths by which the western continents had been, in part at least, originally peopled.

It fell also to Portugal to be the first to put to practical tests that complemental theory, which was another part of that large comprehension of the cosmographical problem, which had, in the main, come down from Aristotle, till it had captured the imagi-

nation of Alfonso of Portugal and of Toscanelli in Florence. This other and complemental theory likewise depended upon a belief in the sphericity of the earth, — a belief which was ancient in the time when Greek science was at its best, and which wise men had never ceased to cherish through all the ages. It held to an extension of the habitable globe east and west, which was as necessary as one to the north and south. The champion of this belief in the middle years of the fifteenth century, seeking to evolve practical tests to the scholar's dream, was Alfonso, King of Portugal. Before Prince Henry died, in 1460, this monarch had already entered upon the demonstration of this theory, which was to find partial vindication in 1492, and a completed one under Magellan thirty years later.

Sixty years and more earlier than the fateful voyage of Columbus, the great island of Antillia, the nominal forerunner of the Antilles, and the prototype of the New World, had appeared for the first time conspicuously on the map of Bianco. It may have been but the result of vague notions to set an ominous land in the midst of that darksome sea. It may have been the result of actual contact, helped by the natural instinct which gives imaginary details to oceanic voids. We may never know the truth. Certain it is, there was something more than a dream, when as early as 1457, and thirty years before the little fleet of crazy ships crawled out of the harbor of Palos on that August morning, four centuries ago, this Portuguese king authorized a western voyage of discovery. We have distinct proofs, which repeated researches in the Archives at Lisbon have revealed of late years, that before the intervention of Toscanelli in 1474, Alfonso caused other expeditions for western search to be dispatched. They all, through stress of weather or faint-heartedness in the seamen, failed in those actual results which are associated with the name of Columbus. They were the forerunners, presaging what was to come in the ripeness of time.

Amid the surging emotions of men in these years of the greatest geographical development which the world has ever known, there were two turning-points in men's progress, of which we must not forget the influence. They both helped to lead men to the finding of the new lands and to the removing of clouds about them. They were movements that were independent of

individual action. They were combined forces in inevitable progress.

The first of these was the then young art of printing, which, in placing the old philosophers and cosmographers in the hands of many, created that public opinion which is always necessary to sustain great strides of onwardness, — public opinion concentrated in master minds. In the second place, we must credit what I will not call the rising spirit of the Reformation, but rather a revulsion among the faithful of the Church to the inordinate pretensions, not of papal authority, but of the temporary incumbents of the Holy Seat. It was this revulsion which put the Spanish acquiescence in the Bull of Demarcation in expediency, rather than in faithful obedience. It was this disregard of papal control that pushed the meridian of separation farther to the west, so that Portuguese names were placed on the headlands of Newfoundland and Brazil. England had for a century or more insisted on emancipating herself from the papal supervision, as to the occupation of new lands; and this same independence now sent John Cabot to the discovery of our own shores. But in the midst of all this reaction, the Church found an unabated constancy in Columbus, which forbade his conforming to the treaty of Tordesillas, and made him to his death stand faithful to the power of the Pope, as manifested in the Bull of Demarcation.

I have said that from 1474 we trace the cardinal influence of Toscanelli, the famous Florentine astronomer, — the same upon whose meridian line athwart the pavement of the Duomo at Florence the traveler gazes to-day. Let us glance a moment into the library of that learned man, in his palace upon the Arno, and see him sitting there, with the white hairs of nearly fourscore years flowing from beneath a velvet skull-cap and spreading upon his bended shoulders. Mark the apparatus which encumbers the apartment, — the hanging globe, which men of his kind had never failed to understand; the astrolabe, upon which Regiomontanus had expended his ingenuity; the lunar tables, which the eager mariners, inspired by confidence in the compass derived from the Levant, had long carried to sea, beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Look at those heavy tomes on his table, as he bows

above them, and we find them to be the "De Situ Orbis" of Strabo, who had revived the views of Aristotle in the first century, and whose "Geography" had now only recently come from the press; the astronomical poem of Manilius, damp from the types; and the "Polyhistor" of Solinus. The "Cosmographia" of Ptolemy was the single work of all the great geographers displayed in manuscript, for it was not till the following year that Sixtus the Fifth ordered that it should be put to press. These, with Aristotle and Seneca, were the companions of that old man's studious hours. Out of them all, by comparison and deduction, he had raised a vision of the shores of Cathay, lying over against the coast of Spain.

It was to this man, thus surrounded in that Florentine palace, that there came one day in 1474 a missive in the interests of King Alfonso, then, as we have seen, struggling with the great problem, and asking its explanation of this Italian sage. Our American students have only very recently been made aware, how, at a later day, the Emperor Maximilian urged precisely the same views upon Alfonso's successor, King John; and how they were enforced by a learned Dr. Münzmeister, of the imperial city of Nuremberg, in an epistle to the same King John, written in apparent ignorance of Columbus and his urgency. This is the more strange, as Martin Behaim, who had just then made his famous globe in that city, was seemingly a friend of this cosmographer, and a fellow-advocate of a western voyage. This letter of Münzmeister goes a great way to show that the needy Genoese adventurer, who had been hanging about the shipping on the Tagus, had had no intercourse with the most famous cosmographer then living in the Portuguese capital.

So the belief in a western passage was in the air, and wherever learning had given to men a habit of expansion and insight, the outcome was foreseen. The cosmographical theory needed a man who could dare to make it a fact.

To the letter of the Portuguese sovereign, Toscanelli replied by sending to him that map which corresponded probably very nearly to what has come down to us in the Behaim globe. Though Las Casas had it, the map has disappeared, and he tells us that it exemplified the oceanic theory that placed Asia over against Spain. The map was accompanied by a letter enforcing

these views, which had sprung from collating the opinions of learned men from the days of Aristotle. This letter has not come down to us in the hand of its writer; but the original Latin, copied by Columbus himself on the flyleaf of a book in the remnant of the library of his son, Ferdinand Columbus, is preserved in Seville. The receipt of this letter from Toscanelli was simply a confirmation of the views which Alfonso had been acting upon in authorizing explorations towards the west. How long after 1474 it was, when a similar communication reached Columbus, is in dispute. The future admiral had only recently come to Lisbon, and it is a question if he had earlier come in contact with the theories which were now having a new interest for the learned. Mr. Clements R. Markham, perhaps the best informed of Englishmen in this field, has within a month or two expressed his belief that Columbus had pondered on these views before leaving Savona in 1473, but it is an opinion which he does not claim to substantiate by proofs. He reaches his conclusion by supposing that it was but a short time after Alfonso had received his communication from Toscanelli, and in the same year, 1474, that Columbus, acting upon the reports of Toscanelli's views, himself wrote to the Florentine patriarch and asked anew for his opinions, — a proof that the letter to Alfonso had not actually come, in its completeness, to the attention of Columbus, but that he had heard enough of it to desire to learn more from him who wrote it.

The exact time when Columbus got his response from Florence depends on the interpretation to be given to a phrase which Toscanelli added to this new missive. When the old philosopher received, from this unknown correspondent in Lisbon, a request for a repetition of his views, he replied by sending a copy of his letter to Alfonso's secretary, adding to it that it had been originally written "before the wars in Castile." The date of his communication with the Genoese depends upon the meaning of these words, since the indorsement on the copy had no date. The most eminent living authority on questions of this kind, Henry Harrisse, an American long resident in Paris, understands it to mean, contrary to the view of Mr. Markham, that this communication to Columbus followed, as that to Alfonso had preceded, the wars which were ended in 1479. It was by this treaty between Spain and Portugal that Spain was awarded the Canaries and the right

to explore to the west, and Portugal was given the exclusive privilege of sailing down the coast of Africa.

I must confess that the weight of probability is altogether in favor of the opinion expressed by Harrisse, which would place the forming of the ambitious hopes of Columbus, under the incentive of Toscanelli, not far from the year 1479. Thus it was thirteen years before the final fruition in 1492, that the theory of a westward extension found in this Italian wanderer a courageous adherent destined to work out its solution.

It must be borne in mind that the papal authority had in several bulls, previous to this date, confirmed to Portugal the rights of exploration out upon the Sea of Darkness. It was not only the overweening demands of Columbus for territorial sway, but the content of the Portuguese king with what he was doing and hoped to do under these papal permissions, that induced the final rejection by that power of Columbus's importunities. So the expatriated Genoese, forced to extremities, and with unswerving allegiance to the idea which now possessed him, deserted friends, creditors, and wife. He clandestinely crossed the frontier, and set about his suit for recognition in Spain.

It is a familiar story, full of doubts and complications, which it is not my purpose now to dwell upon. Queen Isabella was won; King Ferdinand simply acquiesced, much to his later regret; and the portentous voyage was made! Columbus was borne along by the supposition that the distance to be traversed was much shorter than it really was, and this misconception luckily supplied a large part of the attendant courage.

By a stroke of fortune which seems to recognize the præcognition of Portugal, with a single ship left to his direction, out of his three, bearing his great message, Columbus sought refuge from a storm in the port of Lisbon, carrying back to Portugal the answer to the vast problem, which Alfonso and Toscanelli had set down on the page of history. It has only very recently been made clear that Portugal grasped the realized conception with great alacrity, and even before Columbus was received by Ferdinand and Isabella at Barcelona, a messenger of the Portuguese king had reached Rome with tidings of the discovery. Here he was when the Spanish messengers arrived, waiting about the Holy Seat, intent to protect the interests of Portugal under

earlier guaranties of the Papacy. Hence the promptness of Pope Alexander's response in the Bull of Demarcation in May, 1493.

Fortunately the exhilarated mind of Columbus was just what was needed to show that what the world is accustomed to call foolhardiness could be sublimated by success; but it was a success that was dependent not only on faith, but upon striking good fortune. If Columbus, in his cock-boats, had really reached the dominions of the Asiatic potentates, it is a question if he had lived to repeat his tale. If a flight of parrots had not induced him to change his course, he might have struck the Florida shores. Here he would have encountered the ferocious natives of that coast, which later Spaniards knew too well. If the fate of Columbus had been like theirs, it is not improbable that Cabral would have occupied in history the proud designation of the Discoverer of America, and eight years hence we should have been engaged with Portugal in the grand ceremonials in which Spain this year fortuitously shares. As it happened, Columbus, in making his landfall among the Bahamas, and in coursing the island shores of so inoffensive a race as the Lucayans, was subjected to no such dangers, and triumphantly returned to repeat the most imposing story in profane history.

I began with crediting to the ancient Greeks the origin of that cosmographical study whose fruition was ultimately found in a new world. Let us turn now to that other ancient people. If the world-maps of Strabo and Ptolemy had not given the space almost entirely to land, the Romans might not have been so wholly engrossed by their land conquests. If the dominion which they held in the world had passed to their rivals, the Carthaginians, with their maritime ambition, the revelations of the Atlantic might not have been delayed so long. If the Romans failed in this supremacy by sea, their descendants acquired it.

Two centuries before Columbus, Dante had looked upon the setting sun as journeying to an unknown world. We have seen how Italy, in the fulness of time, gave Toscanelli to the inception of this ancient and ardent hope. It was to Italy, too, that we owe the wayward zealot, who, kneeling upon the strand of San Salvador, chanted the *Salve Regina* beneath the banner of Castile. It was to a Florentine merchant that we owe those graphic

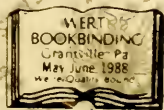
descriptions of the Brazilian coasts, with the lifting of the Southern Cross to wondering eyes, making a theme so fascinating that relentless Fate has made us to-day Americans and not Columbians. It was to Verrazzano, another Italian, that France owed a claim to our Atlantic seaboard, that it was not in French nature to make good in the face of that other claim, which still another Italian, John Cabot, established for the greatest of all colonizing peoples. We are here to-day by virtue of the might which is in English blood, generously mixed with, and not weakened by, a suffusion from the veins of every people beneath the sun.

Spain, France, and England were thus the great claimants of this western land. It was the lot of Spain that she sought gold in the tropics, and she fell behind in the race for power, which depends on character and not on gold. It was the lot of France that she sought to plant a decaying feudalism amid the sterility of the north, and she lost in the conflict with nature and her rivals. It was the lot of England to place her Cavaliers on the Chesapeake and her Roundheads on Massachusetts Bay. The spirits of these indomitable English, reinforced by what could affiliate in other stocks, found the gaps of the Alleghanies, poured along the watercourses of the interior, scaled the passes of the Rockies; and as a new product of amalgamated races, bound as one under the principles of the English common law, they have determined the character of our Pacific coast, from Alaska to Santa Barbara.

And all this has been done under the pioneering of Italy, heir of her elder sister, by the Ægean. Let us not to-day, in this academic atmosphere, forget what the world owes to the learning and to the prescience of Aristotle, Roger Bacon, and Toscanelli, illumined by the dauntlessness and unexampled seamanship of Columbus.

Justin Winsor, '53.





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